DESIGN AS A MAIN COURSE

AIGA

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THE FOOD ISSUE

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Guest co-editor: Catharine Weese

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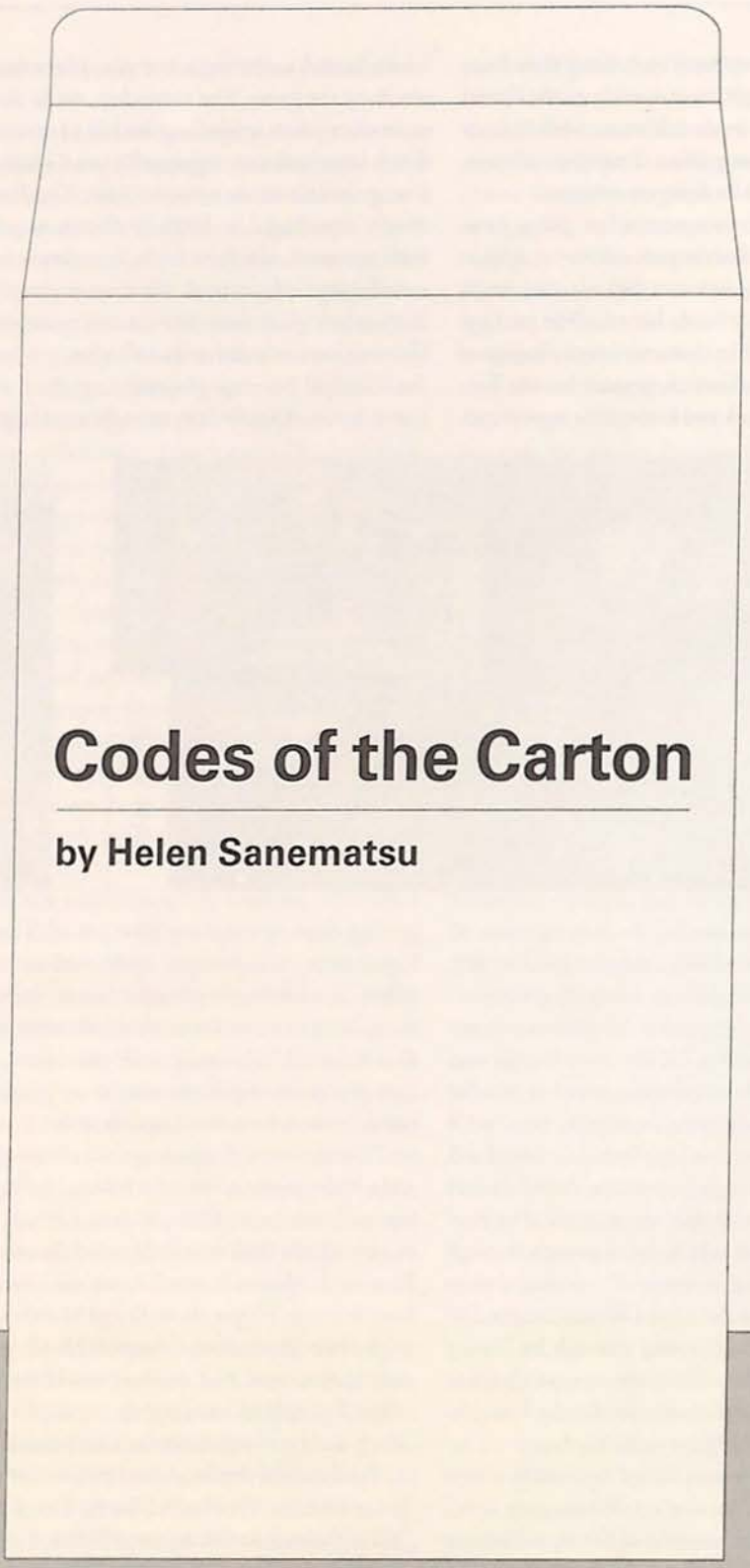


Codes of the Carton

by Helen Sanematsu

Anything as familiar as the milk carton, as unassuming as it is in our day-to-day existence, as undemanding of our attention—anything that has woven itself so invisibly into our lives and our refrigerators is bound to be up to something (fig. 1). Something other than just being a container for a dairy beverage, that is. There had to be an agenda in there somewhere. It warranted investigation.

First, a look at milk itself.

Milk—it does a body good!

Okay, it's advertising copy, paid for by the National Fluid Milk Processor Promotion Board, but there's truth to it. Really. And who wouldn't believe so? On the one hand, you've got your clever "Got Milk?" campaign on the tube (paid for by the California Milk Processor Board) and the celebrity-studded "Milk. Where is your mustache?" campaign going on in print; on the other, you've got the United States Department of Agriculture featuring dairy as one of its five major food groups. It has a permanent spot on the USDA Food Guide Pyramid and in school lunches. Milk has advertising behemoths (the milk mustache campaign was devised by Bozell Worldwide) and the Feds on its side. If that's not enough, milk's goodness is backed up by folks other than the those who produce it and the government that protects them. The *Wellness Encyclopedia*, produced by the University of California–Berkeley *Wellness Letter*, says, "Milk is highly nutritious food that provides nearly all the substances essential for good health in people of all ages." That's a pretty strong endorsement. So don't be dissuaded by the fact that it's Tyra Banks in a bikini telling you so: with milk, you really can believe the hype (fig. 2).

Milk—it's been around a long time

Besides, milk is a staple of the Western diet, with 8,000 years of history behind it. In fact, by the time of the Old Testament, milk was so ingrained in Western culture as to be metaphorical. The Promised Land "flowed with milk and honey." Supermodels in bathing suits aside, milk has been getting good press for a long time. As if being a pillar of Western civilization weren't enough, milk and its consumption are among the things that define us as mammals. Our biological nature has us taking mother's milk as our first source of food. So drinking milk from the carton has a certain definitive precedent.

That taken into account, the question that should be asked is this: how does 8,000 years of press, not to mention biological precedent, relate to packaging? What is it that we encounter when we buy milk at the grocery store? How is this nutritionally, economically, and aesthetically celebrated substance presented to contemporary consumers who just need something to put on their cereal?

A quick look at the dairy aisle provides the answer. The weight of Western history, the mammoth dairy lobby, and the American government itself have combined forces to produce this (fig. 3).

(fig.) Typical half-gallon milk carton.

(fig. 2) Bozell Worldwide's milk promotion featuring Tyra Banks. At this scale, it's clear that milk and silicone just don't mix.

(fig. 3) Herein lies 8,000 years of Western civilization

(fig. 4) A Chicago-area dairy case featuring Country Delight milk products and the nationally available Lactaid.

Where's Tyra?

Tyra Banks and her Bozell-brokered presence are not needed here. Milk's mythology, its marketing, and its real food value (as trumpeted by the USDA and understood by the general public), have left the in-store appearance of this regionally produced staple up to local companies that distribute to supermarkets, grocery stores, and mom-and-pops. Smaller stores feature only one brand of milk prominently (see fig. 4) and even larger supermarkets feature the entire line of only two or at most three brands, including specially marketed brands, such as lactose-reduced or organic milks. Consequently, the competition between brands is not the burden of its on-shelf appearance so much as it is the task of the companies themselves, who bid competitively for contracts with markets, chain by chain. This competition is tempered by the fact that the price of milk is often protected. New York City, for example, regulates the price of milk sold within city limits. So by the time milk reaches the shelf, it has already won the right to be there, and is priced so as not to discourage consumption, or actually to promote it. The store has bought it, the city protects it. The only task left for the milk carton, then, is to present a product that consumers have already been told is healthy by the government, glamorous by the media, and wholesome and full of goodness by centuries of mythology. The package is almost irrelevant to the success of the product. Of course, it shouldn't be *un*appealing (prominently featuring cow udders, for example), should not compete with or detract from milk's accumulated buzz—historical, mythological, or pop-cultural—and should provide the minimum amount of information regarding type of milk and nutritional content. Apart from these strictures, it merely has to establish some form of brand identity, and it sells.

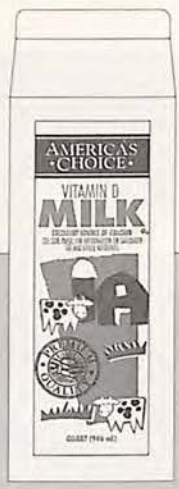
As a result, most milk packages have adopted straightforward, conservative design strategies that rely on symmetry, simple use of two or three flat colors (and sometimes just one), unassuming typography, and cartoonlike illustrations or company logos, when there are illustrations at all (fig. 5). The visual impact of most milk carton designs results not from the appearance of an individual package but of many of them in a row, as displayed in the supermarket (fig. 6). The use of color to distinguish milk varieties within brands heightens the visual impact of the milk section of the dairy aisle, and yet does so not to distinguish the brand in particular but to bring attention to the fact that you are in the milk section. Bands of red (whole milk), pink (2%), and light blue (nonfat) tell you that you're in the right place for milk. (See the milk color chart on page 29.)

While not attempting the glamour and glitz of the national milk campaigns, some brands are nevertheless picking up the pace in milk carton design with snazzier imagery and more nuanced printing, asymmetric design, and dramatic application of themes (figs. 7, 8, and 9). Garelick Farms in New England has introduced a new, plastic pint bottle of milk with colorful, cow-dotted labels and casual, kid-oriented typography that gives the package a fun, Snapple-esque, recreational beverage feel (fig. 10). Similarly, Dean Foods in

(fig. 5) White Hen Pantry's one-color milk carton

(fig. 6) Designs form eye-catching repeating patterns on market shelves

(fig. 7) A carton printed with process color



(fig. 8) Playful cut-out imagery on a tri-state area brand.

(fig. 9) This cow-hide clad brand is produced by the same dairy that makes Pasture Perfect.

Chicago has introduced its "Chug" line of products, individual servings in plastic-wrapped containers that make a striking presentation in the supermarket (fig. 11). Unlike most brands, both of these products lines feature flavored milks.

These latest innovations—the introduction of photorealistic imagery, the clever "spotted" milk cartons, the sports-drink-esque packaging—are remarkable because they are innovations. Imitation milk products, such as Coffeemate Non-Dairy Creamer, commonly use photo-quality imagery and process printing (see fig. 12), and Quik, a chocolate milk promoted by food giant Nestlé (and produced by local dairies—Tuscan holds the contract to supply the New York metropolitan area), is housed in a bright, active package accentuated by its chocolate bunny mascot (fig. 13). Both capitalize on the strongest identifying feature of milk packaging—the carton—while pushing the graphics further. Why has it taken milk itself so long to use similar attention-getting strategies?

Because it hasn't had to. As a staple of our diet, milk has no real peer. And its marketing via the more traditionally designed milk carton (and the even more modest milk jug) has reflected its singular position in the beverage world. It is design that betrays no threat of competition, that does not have to outshine its shelfmates, because there are none. Consequently, a more assertive visual presence in the supermarket—more aggressive design—suggests a marketing approach that relies on promoting milk not solely as a staple food (as the national campaigns do) but as a beverage choice in a market full of alternative products. And it enters this competition in the guise of the products against which it pits itself. Hence, eye-catching cartons and milk with attitude ("Totally Whole" milk, "Chug"). It's as if the glitz of the national campaigns turned the old staple into the hot new beverage, and the packaging has begun to respond. Or, rather, the national campaigns initially took up the challenge of the encroaching soft-drink market, and the smaller players, the local milk distributors, have begun to join the fight.

So, are milk cartons up to something, as previously suggested? When you begin to examine the innovations in milk packaging and compare them with the standard cartons that preceded them, it's clear that something is afoot. Milk may have thousands of years of history and millions of years of biology behind it, but it's the Snapple World now, baby, and milk is gearing up to enter a ring of competition that had never existed for it before. The "Milk Mustache" and "Got Milk?" campaigns were conceived to combat a steady twenty-five-year decline in milk consumption, and now the battle is being taken to the shelves. Milk has come to realize that it is not alone, and its packaging is changing as a result. Where will it all lead? Milk in two-liter bottles? Will low-fat one day be referred to as "Diet Milk"? Will milk be fortified with ginseng and echinacea? Who knows? It would be a whole new old "real thing."

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(figs. 10 + 11) Milk repackaged as a soft-drink, not a staple, in Connecticut and Chicago.

(fig. 12) Non-milks just try harder.

(fig. 13) The four-color chocolate cartoon bunny vs. the flat white hen.

COWS

A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE ICONOGRAPHY OF MILK CARTONS

Milk cartons fall into three categories: bucolic, typographic, and bridge

Bucolic cartons feature references to dairy culture, which may involve cows, barns, silos, milkmaids, rolling hills, sunsets, or any combination of these. They range in quality from representational to abstract. Such forms are often featured in oval medallions and are often the company logo. Bucolic forms are notable for their (heavily veiled) admission of the source of the contents of the package. Humans are the only mammal that consumes milk after infancy, and is also the only one to drink the milk of other mammals. Bucolic cartons do not shrink from these disturbing facts.

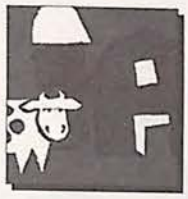
An interesting member of this category is the Tuscan milk carton, featuring the most appealing of the cows in this survey, an artsy-looking (udderless) Holstein rendered in a woodblock style, in a Chagall-esque pose, sailing over a big yellow orb and a row of townhouses. In attempting to help the sophisticated urban consumer (Tuscan is distributed widely in the New York metropolitan area) identify with the rural cow motif, the Tuscan company has drawn upon the "cow jumped over the moon" nursery rhyme, adding a literary reference to its milk. Meanwhile, in keeping with a city-that-never-sleeps theme, it has transformed the yellow circle that usually represents the sun on these cartons to a big full moon.

Typographic milk carton designs, on the other hand, rely solely on type and blocks of color to communicate their message. Their function is reduced to a labeling of their contents, with no attempt to address the origins or cultural context of milk.

So called because they straddle the typographic and bucolic categories, bridge cartons rely primarily on typography to communicate its contents, and yet attempt non-verbal communication by using abstract forms to represent bucolic themes. In the Sunnydale example, a big yellow circle and wavy bands suggest a sun and rolling fields, an frequent theme in this survey. Produced by Sunnydale Farms Milk, in Brooklyn, New York, this design may be as close as Sunnydale dared get to alluding to the rural nature of its product. Sunnydale also features on its cartons a pointy sunburst with what appear to be two runaways from the Campbell's Soup kids playgroup, aptly named Sunny (the boy) and Dale (the girl).

ENVIRONMENTS

DAIRY



MILK BRAND (STATE)	WHOLE	2% FAT	1% FAT	SKIM
AMERICA'S CHOICE (TRI-STATE)	red	n/a	n/a	n/a
COUNTRY DELIGHT (CHI)	red	blue	n/a	turquoise
FARMLAND (NY)	red	purple	green	n/a
GUIDA (CT)	n/a	n/a	n/a	green
LACTAID (NATIONAL)	n/a	light blue	blue	purple
MEIJER (CHI)	red	orange	n/a	lavender
NATURAL BY NATURE	red	purple	lavender	light blue
ORGANIC COW (NY)	yellow	purple	lavender	light blue
SEALTEST (NY)	n/a	n/a	n/a	turquoise
SUNNYDALE (NYC)	red	pink	turquoise	n/a
SWISS VALLEY FARMS (CHI)	red	blue	n/a	pink
TUSCAN (NYC)	red	green	purple	blue
WHITE HEN PANTRY (CHI)	maroon	blue	n/a	turquoise

MILK CARTON COLORING

Milk packaging uses color to identify variations in fat content. Deep, primary colors, predominantly red, indicate whole milk, which is 3.5 to 4% milkfat. Pastel colors, pink and light blue or turquoise, indicate fat-free milk, with 1% and 2% milk falling somewhere between whole milk and nonfat on the spectrum. The intensity of the color corresponds to the density of the milk it represents, so rich, fully fatted and opaque whole milk is in a red carton, while fat-free, translucent skim is in turquoise, which also alludes to the milk's bluish tint. The table above provides a breakdown.